

Wreck of the *Captain Lincoln*

The history of human activity on the North Spit of Coos Bay commenced with the drama of shipwreck and survival. On September 14, 1851, the U. S. Army established Fort Orford on Oregon's southwest coast. The post was to provide a military presence to check hostilities between miners and Indians along the shoreline and in the Rogue River Valley, a rapidly settling district which lay nearly 100 miles to the east through the unexplored and virtually impenetrable Coast Range forests (Fraser 1963:118-119).

The *Captain Lincoln* sailed from San Francisco in December, heavily loaded with lumber, tools, foodstuffs, weapons, munitions, and baggage for the small garrison at Fort Orford. The vessel encountered a winter storm and, unable to make the open roadstead beneath the headlands at Port Orford, was driven far to sea. A contingent of soldiers destined for the post, worked for hours at the pumps, assisting the ship's crew in a valiant effort to keep the vessel afloat as waves washed over her decks (Beckham 1971:1).

On January 3, 1852, the *Captain Lincoln* veered toward an unknown and uncharted coast. Through the mist the men on the decks could see a stretch of frothy, white waves and the expanse of a wide sandy beach. Philip Brack, one of the soldiers, recalled:

It was during my watch that he [the ship's captain] gave the order 'Hard a lee,' while we were endeavoring to put further to sea. The command obeyed, and with full canvas unfurled, we were carried toward the beach. We seemed to strike a bar that was about 200 yards from the shore; but the huge breakers lifted our trembling vessel over into deeper water, but she settled down to the bottom and for awhile the breakers rolled over her decks (Dodge 1898:114-116).

The castaways from the *Captain Lincoln* were highly fortunate. Although their vessel had foundered on a sandbar adjacent to the wave-swept shoreline, they were able to make their way safely to the beach. They had grounded on the North Spit of Coos Bay, a little-known estuary occupied in 1852 by the Coos

Indians. Lt. Henry Stanton took charge of the survivors and had them strip the ship of everything useful as well as hauling to shore the government stores for Fort Orford. Stanton had the men erect a mast from which flew the American flag. The party hauled ashore the ship's sails to construct canvas tents. They salvaged the ship's stove to outfit their mess (Dodge 1898:117).

Weeks and months passed as the U.S. Army laid plans to rescue the survivors and dispose of the government supplies. Morris S. Miller, Assistant Quartermaster of the Pacific Division, drew the assignment. He found no captain willing to risk a ship to sail into uncharted Coos Bay. Miller reached Fort Orford in early April, sailing for San Francisco via the Columbia River. "I found here," he wrote, "a small party of dragoons who had been sent down from Camp Castaway by Lieutenant Stanton, to await the arrival of despatches [sic] from headquarters." On April 20 Miller set out via the coast trail with men and twenty mules for Coos Bay. It took the party four days to reach the estuary (U.S. House of Representatives 1852:103-104).

Miller found the dragoons and the mariners of the *Captain Lincoln* huddled beneath the spars and canvas of Camp Castaway. He wrote:

The camp was near the point where the wreck had occurred, on the sand-spit between Kowes river and the Pacific--a very dreary position, the sand being miles in extent in both directions, and blown by the wind in clouds, penetrating every canvass covering, and besprinkling every article of food while cooking--the only protection being a ridge of sand hillocks, behind which the camp was situated (U.S. House of Representatives 1852:104).

Miller traveled north to the Umpqua and hired teamsters with wagons to go to Coos Bay to haul the salvage from the shipwreck to the east shore of the North Spit. He finally prevailed upon the owners of the *Nassau*, then moored in the Umpqua estuary, to go to Coos Bay where she arrived on May 5. Four days later the *Nassau*, loaded with the salvage and the remaining castaways, dropped down the estuary to the bar but was held in the harbor by adverse winds. Ten days later, the *Nassau* passed out of Coos Bay and put in at Port

Orford to deliver the government supplies and personnel--four months delayed by the misadventure and loss of the *Captain Lincoln* (U.S. House of Representatives 1852:104-108, 121).

The first, unwilling Euro-American residents of Coos Bay, were the U.S. Army forces at Camp Castaway on the North Spit. Their sojourn in 1852 marked the end of the uncontested tenure of the Coos Indians on the estuary. Their camp marked the beginning of a long and enduring federal presence on the North Spit.